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Only NATO can defend Europe

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Abstract Twenty-five years after the end of the Cold War, there is no viable alternative to NATO's security umbrella over an expanded Europe. The eastern part of the continent is confronting a revisionist and expansionist Russia. Its stability can only be ensured by an effective alliance that establishes permanent bases in the most vulnerable regions as a deterrent to Moscow's aggression. A strong US presence within a broad alliance that includes all of Europe's democracies is in America's national interest and that of all NATO members. This is needed to preserve security across the European continent and to assist in confronting assorted threats to the transatlantic commonwealth.

Keywords NATO | Europe | Russia | Threats | Deterrents | Challenges | Capabilities

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Introduction

Twenty-five years after the end of the Cold War, there is no viable alternative on the horizon to NATO's security umbrella over an expanded Europe. The idea floated a quarter of a century ago that Europe could scale down its defences and even dismantle the North Atlantic Alliance exposed a flawed fixation on an 'end of history' scenario that has never materialised. In practice, the forces of state nationalism and imperialist revisionism in Russia have proved stronger than those of liberalism and international cooperation with the West.

In many respects, a 'return of history' scenario has become more evident in and around Europe, with Russia re-emerging as a revanchist power and threatening Europe's entire eastern flank. In addition, the EU itself faces existential problems, from the financial and institutional to the demographic and political. In a potentially unstable and fracturing continent, NATO is the sole remaining institution that upholds international security. And it may become the sole multinational organisation that can provide Europe with a measure of coherence. Moreover, NATO is the binding glue of the transatlantic link with Washington.

NATO without alternatives

Several Western European states have hosted US bases since the creation of NATO in April 1949. Since the end of the Cold War and the dismantling of the Soviet bloc in the early 1990s, numerous voices among the new NATO members have called for permanent bases that would include US troops in the eastern part of the continent. Such voices have grown louder as Russia under President Vladimir Putin has become increasingly assertive and is now threatening the independence of numerous states, from the Baltic region to the Black and Caspian Seas.

A NATO alliance that encompasses all of Europe with a permanent multinational military presence in Europe's east is essential for four fundamental reasons. First, there is no viable alternative to NATO's political and military structure. The EU does not provide security or generate confidence among states facing potential aggression. The EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy is primarily a diplomatic mechanism, which openly acknowledges that NATO remains responsible for the territorial defence of Europe. Although the EU has engaged in several peacekeeping, policing and humanitarian missions, NATO possesses the main combat force not only of its European members, but most importantly of the US, which contributes a disproportionate share of Alliance troops, equipment and other resources.

A strong NATO alliance is the backbone of European security. Proposals for a European Army simply dilute and distract attention from the only capable multinational Western security organisation. A European Army would not only siphon off NATO's already limited assets and diminish its capabilities, but would also trigger rivalries between

Europe and North America over the deployment of military forces. Additionally, it could split Europe between countries committed to upholding close security relations with the US and states at a safer distance from Russia that see a lesser need for American security guarantees. Such an outcome would in effect grant Moscow a strategic victory over NATO.

The second reason an effective NATO is needed is that it contributes to ensuring the institutional integrity of members, together with promoting regional stability between them. Its entry stipulations include functional statehood, minority rights, civilian control over the military and settled borders with all neighbours. All new members have had to fulfil these criteria. Such conditionality also generates confidence for foreign investors and sets the stage for the integration of member states into the EU.

The third rationale for an expanded NATO concerns the sovereign choice of every independent state to determine its alliances and security links and not remain vulnerable to pressure from predatory neighbours such as Russia. In this context, it is important to distinguish between Russia's national interests and Moscow's state ambitions. If Russia's neighbours join NATO, this poses no threat to Russia's security—contrary to the Kremlin's claims. However, it does thwart Russia's ability to control these countries' security postures and foreign policy.

Russia's ambitions revolve around expanding the 'Eurasian' zone in which Russia is the dominant political player. 'Eurasianism' involves two interconnected strategies: transforming Europe into an appendage of the Russian sphere of influence and debilitating Atlanticism by undermining Europe's connections with the US.

The EU occupies a pivotal position in Russia's strategy as it can either strengthen or weaken the Kremlin's approach. Moscow views a unified EU foreign policy that is synchronised with Washington's and undermines Russia's aspirations as a threat that needs to be neutralised. The EU's democratisation agenda is also perceived as a pernicious ploy to undermine Russia's agenda of supporting pliable governments in neighbouring post-Soviet states. Furthermore, EU standards for government accountability, business transparency and market competition endanger Russia's economic penetration, which is primarily based on opaque and corrupt business practices.

An accommodationist Western approach that concedes some special 'national interests' to Russia not only is unacceptable to all the independent states that emerged from the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc, but also whets Moscow's appetite for further imperial aggrandisement. Paradoxically, consenting to Russia's asymmetrical 'national interests', through which it claims a privileged role in influencing its neighbours' affairs, is more likely to result in a collision with NATO than a more dynamic approach. If the Kremlin operates with the conviction that it has a free hand to methodically undermine countries along its borders, this could result in serious miscalculations when it overreaches by sparking conflicts with Alliance members.

Emerging threats from Moscow

The fourth and most important reason why a substantial NATO military presence in Eastern Europe is vital is that it forms the most effective deterrent and responder to major new threats. Two core challenges emanate from Russia: expansion and implosion. Moscow's primary objective is to restore Russia as a major pole of power in a multi-polar world. The overarching goal with regard to the West is to reverse US influences in Europe and Eurasia. Russia's neo-imperial project seeks predominant influence over the foreign and security policies of immediate neighbours so that they will either remain neutral or support Russia's agenda. In effect, Russia seeks dependent protectorates along its borders, tied into institutions controlled from Moscow (Bugajski and Doran 2016).

While its goals are imperial, the Kremlin's strategies and tactics are flexible, and this can make them more effective than if they were rigid. Moscow engages in enticements, threats, incentives and pressures, while claiming it is pragmatically pursuing its national interests. It pursues asymmetrical offensives by interjecting itself in its neighbours' affairs, capturing important sectors of local economies, subverting vulnerable political systems, corrupting national leaders, penetrating key security institutions, challenging territorial integrity and undermining international unity.

Moscow is also not averse to using direct military force, as exemplified by the war against Georgia in August 2008, followed by the forced partitioning of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the attack on Ukraine in March 2014 with the annexation of Crimea. According to a recent report by RAND Corporation, given current force deployments, Russia could steamroll across the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania with ground forces reaching the three capitals in a matter of hours. Without a more intensive regional presence, NATO forces would not have the ability to defend its most exposed states (Shlapak and Johnson 2016). Hence, the factor of deterrence may have limited value if Moscow decides to test NATO's response.

The RAND report mirrors the concerns of Chairman of the NATO Military Committee General Petr Pavel, who has warned that Moscow could conquer the three Baltic states within two days despite their NATO membership. This is possible because of Russia's ongoing military expansion, NATO's relatively slow-moving command structure, and the decline in Alliance capabilities because of lowered defence spending and the withdrawal of US forces, including two heavily armoured US divisions from Germany, with only two now remaining in Europe.

Russia's potential implosion could present an even more unpredictable future in which NATO would need to manage the multi-regional repercussions. A huge failed state on Europe's doorstep would have various destabilising consequences for the continent—whether refugee outflows, the spillover of violence, civil wars or the emergence of new aspiring states. Paradoxically, Putin's attempts to construct a new Russia-centred dominion are likely to accelerate the country's decline.

An economically and militarily overstretched Russia may witness escalating economic, social, political and sub-regional turmoil and present even more menacing challenges for Western policy. NATO needs to assess the possible consequences of the chaotic downfall of the Putinist system and prepare contingencies for the conflicts that this may generate. In particular, Russia's neighbours must be shielded from the most destabilising scenarios of civil conflict and Russia's violent fragmentation, which could spill into NATO territory. By positioning permanent NATO bases in the countries bordering Russia, the Alliance would be better prepared for the negative consequences.

NATO realism

NATO's European flank remains dependent on the US for its security, as its defence expenditures have been seriously depleted since the end of the Cold War. Without American involvement Europe would be unable to deter an increasingly belligerent Russia. Europe's demilitarisation over the last decade has coincided with Russia's military build-up (Michta 2015). The US provides 70 % of all NATO defence spending, while Europe's contribution to NATO's military capability is less than 25 %, and the figure is steadily falling. Several countries have decimated their equipment to such an extent that they may be incapable of deploying more than a few thousand troops in the event of outright war. Meanwhile, Russia is re-arming to the tune of \$700 billion over the next decade and plans to introduce the next generation of armour, aircraft and missiles, and to modernise its nuclear forces.

Since the end of the Cold War, US officials have been prodding their European counterparts to increase defence spending in line with NATO guidelines of 2 % of GDP. Several US defence secretaries have challenged their allies to stop cutting financial support for NATO in the face of emerging and escalating security threats. They have argued that this could result in Europe's 'demilitarisation', particularly in Western Europe, where political leaders and publics are becoming increasingly averse to the deployment of military force. Shortfalls in funding and capabilities will make it difficult for the Alliance to handle several simultaneous security dangers. Over the past decade only a handful of NATO members have consistently spent 2 % of their GDP on defence. During 2015 the defence budgets of several members, including the UK and Germany, actually shrank, despite pledges issued at NATO's Wales Summit in September 2014 to increase financing of the military. In stark contrast, several front-line NATO states have decided to steadily increase their defence budgets in the face of growing threats from Russia. These include Poland, Romania and the three Baltic states.

In addition to increased funding, the European allies must also pursue military modernisation and become capable of defending all of NATO's borders rather than operating under the traditional formula of simply being able to retaliate and allowing the extended deterrent to be provided primarily by Washington. There are legitimate concerns that most European states could not realistically meet the goals of optimal capability without significant reforms to their military structure and the elimination of waste, duplication and mismanagement in their defence bureaucracies. If the current feebleness in

defence spending and capabilities continues, the next US president will come under increasing domestic pressure to curtail the American commitment to Europe's security. This will certainly suit a revisionist Kremlin that continues to test NATO's defences along Russia's western flank.

In response to conventional military threats from Russia, it is essential to have an effective tripwire by ensuring the permanent presence of soldiers from various NATO states in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, the most exposed members bordering Russia. Moves in this direction, through the use of air policing units, regular military exercises and the creation of small bases to accommodate the planned NATO Rapid Reaction Force, were taken as the war in Ukraine unfolded during 2014 and 2015. Nonetheless, fears remained that without a more permanent stationing of substantial multinational NATO forces in the front-line states, these countries could be quickly overrun by a Russian assault.

At a mini-NATO summit in Bucharest on 4 November 2015, nine countries—Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia—signed a declaration calling on NATO to maintain a permanent presence in the region to deter Russian aggression. Since Moscow's assault on Ukraine, NATO has taken initial steps to bolster the defence of vulnerable members by adding combat aircraft support to NATO's Baltic air policing mission: dispatching a dozen F-16 fighters to Poland, and deploying Airborne Warning and Control System reconnaissance aircraft in Poland and Romania to help patrol NATO's eastern borders. NATO has also drawn up defence plans for Poland and the Baltic states, including guarantees of NATO's military response to outside attacks.

Deliberations have also intensified over the potential hosting of NATO military infrastructure. However, at the NATO Summit on 4–5 September 2014, Alliance leaders did not endorse the positioning of permanent bases in Eastern Central Europe despite the urging from Warsaw and the three Baltic governments. Instead, they agreed to create a spearhead contingent within the existing NATO Response Force—a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF). Once formed, it would be capable of deploying at short notice along NATO's periphery and would consist of land, air, maritime and Special Operations Force components.

It is intended that the VJTF will include 4,000 troops trained to move on 48 hours' notice to hotspots in any NATO member state. Nonetheless, this contingent would be too small to counter the massive military might Russia has deployed along its western frontier. The spearhead force is to be part of a wider NATO response force of 13,000–30,000 troops that could take weeks to deploy in a crisis. It will benefit from equipment and logistics facilities pre-positioned in Eastern Central European countries, but the troops will not be permanently stationed in the region (NATO 2015). The force could be used as a mobile tripwire when dispatched to a threatened state. However, at this stage in its deployment, it is difficult to estimate the effectiveness of a relatively small VJTF contingent in deterring Russia's outright invasion of a NATO member.

In February 2015, NATO decided to establish six command centres in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria to connect national forces with NATO reinforcements. They will be used for logistics, reconnaissance and planning missions with a multinational headquarters in Szczecin, on Poland's Baltic coast. This will enable the rapid influx of thousands of NATO troops in the event of a crisis. The positioning of military hardware without the presence of US and other Allied troops is premised on the assumption that the local armed forces would be capable of defending the country for a sufficient time to allow for the timely arrival of more substantial NATO units.

Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey has stated that America's military is ready to ensure the deployment of high alert forces within 48 hours to NATO countries bordering Russia (*Joinfo* 2015). If this is insufficient to stem a Russian attack, then Washington will be ready to use additional force to protect its allies. General Philip Breedlove, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander for Europe, has called Moscow's conquest of Crimea a 'paradigm shift' that requires a fundamental rethinking of where American forces are located. In February 2016, Secretary of State John Kerry announced that the US will significantly upgrade its commitment to the security of Europe's eastern flank, with a planned four-fold increase in spending on the European Reassurance Initiative, from \$790 million to \$3.4 billion.

To maintain NATO as an effective deterrent, Washington needs to adopt a more forward presence on the 'eastern front'. NATO must also update its security posture to deal with new threats. For example, the Washington Treaty should be updated, especially Article 5 and the definition of an attack on a NATO member. This must reflect the challenges associated with contemporary warfare, including externally generated insurgencies, cyber-attacks, information warfare, and other forms of subversion aimed at undermining state independence or truncating its territory.

The Alliance needs to prepare for a wide assortment of unconventional threats and ensure that its capabilities match its commitments, including stronger national capabilities that increase the costs of a Russian attack (Grygiel and Mitchell 2014). Local forces must possess the ability to protect their own borders and increase the cost of aggression even if they cannot win a conflict unaided. In particular, NATO needs to place greater emphasis on ensuring the ability of front-line states to defend themselves during the critical, early phases of a limited war.

Each NATO state bordering Russia requires three fundamental elements: adequate infrastructure and pre-positioned equipment to allow for the speedy deployment of other NATO forces, early warning of a Russian covert attack and capable forces that can respond quickly to an assault on its territorial integrity. Each country also needs US and Western European forces positioned in them on a permanent basis to act as a tripwire against a potential Russian attack. Front-line states also require an offensive component that can threaten Russia's aggressive operations by targeting its staging areas, airports, radar installations, sea and river ports, and logistical nodes (Grygiel 2015). Defensive capabilities alone are unlikely to be sufficient to deter a military assault.

Conclusion

For the US an unstable and insecure Europe that is fractured internally and whose borders are challenged by a belligerent Russia would constitute the greatest foreign policy disaster since the Second World War. To prevent such developments, NATO must revive its core mandate of defending the European homeland and focus less on out-of-area operations. By shifting bases and equipment eastward to confront the newest threats, NATO can help ensure that it has sufficient manpower and firepower to dissuade a Russian offensive against the most exposed Alliance members. An effective NATO remains the key institution for protecting Europe's security. It may also become the sole multinational organisation that can provide the continent with a measure of policy coherence and maintain the transatlantic link with Washington.

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